

Our sons were born at Methodist Hospital in Indianapolis and for five dollars, they'd put your child's name on a little plaque and hang it on the wall of the maternity ward hallway. I was also born at Methodist, back in 1961, when it only cost a dollar to have your child's name put on the wall, but I was the fourth child and by then my parents were no longer enamored of the process, so they skipped the plaque, and consequently there's no proof of my birth. But when our sons were born, Joan and I paid the five dollars to have our son's names put on the wall and whenever I'm at Methodist, I go to the maternity ward hallway and look at Spencer's and Sam's names and remember when they were born. Oh, what a time that was—the screaming, the crying, the fainting—but after awhile I settled down and everything was fine.

I remember being at Methodist Hospital this time last year. I'd gotten a phone call that my friend Tom Mullen was close to death, so I went to Methodist to be with him. His family was there, along with their pastor, and we sat by Tom's bedside for eight hours telling Tom stories until he died. It was late in the night and I was tired, but instead of going straight home, I went to the maternity ward hallway, and looked up my son's names, because I needed to remember that in addition to deaths and endings, there are also births and beginnings.

One of the things I enjoy about the Bible is that it is multivalent. That's a big word, but don't let it throw you. When something is multivalent, it means it has several different meanings. So two people can read the same story in the Bible, and draw two different meanings or conclusions from the exact same story and they can both be right. This is why we're not fundamentalists. Fundamentalists read the Bible and say, "Here's what that story means..." They believe there's only one correct interpretation, only one possible meaning. But the Bible is multivalent, which means two people can read about Sarah giving birth to Isaac while in her 90's and one person can think, "It's a miracle. God had an elderly woman give birth!" And the second person can read it and think, "Boy, just when you think there is no hope, no chance for happiness, something happens that you least expect, a blessing you thought impossible, and just like that your life is transformed."

There are several instances of miraculous births in the Bible, when God intervened to create new life in seemingly impossible circumstances. In fact, sometimes the circumstances were so unusual, the initial reaction was either "Yeah, right" as was the case with Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. Or laughter, as was the case with Abraham and Sarah, the parents of Isaac, who laughed so hard when told in their old age they'd have a child, they made God laugh. So God said, "Call him Isaac," which means "may God smile."

We've been talking about passages, about those events in our lives that mark our movement from one status to another. If we pay close attention to those events we might discover they tell us something about God and something about ourselves.

I remember when Spencer was born, and we brought him home for the first time. It was a summer day in late July of 1992. We were living in the city at the time and hadn't been home more than an hour, when I glanced out the window and noticed the grass was overdue for a mowing. I had never been enthusiastic about mowing, but that day I went immediately to the garage, started the mower, and cut the grass. It was a male version of the nesting syndrome. I wanted our nest to be perfect for our baby.

Before that, I hadn't given much thought to my surroundings. I had been content to take and consume, not giving much thought to what I left behind for others. But just as soon as my children were born, something inside me switched, and I began to care deeply about the environment in which we lived. When I saw people litter, it drove me nuts. If someone vandalized something, it bothered me. If I saw somebody treat someone else poorly, it troubled me. If I saw leaders act selfishly, it angered me. I wanted everything in the world to be nice for the children. Not just nice for my children, but for the world's children.

There's a family of boys next door to us. They're good kids, but like many boys, they can be impulsive and even destructive. They'll go out in the woods, their hunting and gathering gene will kick in, and they'll come home dragging an animal corpse behind them. Or they'll take an ax and whale away on a perfectly good tree. They're boys.

Back in early spring, they went to the Tractor Supply Store and bought 24 baby chickens and are raising them. Mother and father to 24 chickens, and have become fiercely protective. I wouldn't have bet on those chickens lasting a day in those boy's care, but something inside the boys switched on, and they're great parents. Every morning, they wake up, run out to the chicken coop and poke through the straw looking for eggs. I told them the chickens were too young to lay eggs yet, but they believe their chickens are gifted and talented and will lay eggs months earlier than any other chickens.

Joan and I were sitting on our back porch the other night, it had just turned dark, and a teenage boy pulled up in our driveway. He is a friend of our neighbors and is a practical joker. He'd gone to Kroger's and had purchased a dozen brown eggs, then had waited for night to fall, parked in our driveway, and snuck along our fencerow and through the trees, over to the neighbor's chicken coop, where he'd placed those glorious brown eggs under the chickens.

The next morning the neighbor boys woke up and went to the chicken coop and we could hear their shouts all the way over at our house. “Eggs! Eggs!” I’m not going to tell them. We all need births in our lives, we all need that switch inside us to flip on, and feel responsible for something and someone other than ourselves. Some people, like me, have to have children for that. Some people, like Mother Teresa, don’t. And some people just need chickens.

But we all need to learn how to care for something and someone beyond ourselves. The birth of new life is a good way to learn that. One day we’re living for ourselves, thinking only of ourselves, and the next day we realize it isn’t just about us, that we are responsible for others. And not just responsible for our own children. But ultimately responsible for the world’s children. It’s interesting how when God went to Abraham and Sarah, God didn’t just say, “I’m going to give you a child.” No, God said, “You shall be the parents of a nation.” Because God knows if this world, if this experiment in humanity, is ever going to work, we have to see ourselves as keepers of the nation, and keepers of the world, and not just keepers of our own family, or our own race or tribe or party.

My neighbor boys are learning that. So I didn't tell them about those eggs. I don't want them to lose that sense of awe, the feeling of responsibility, that sense of appreciation for the larger world and their role in it. I want them to learn to nurture life, not destroy it. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we all learned that, so that our names, like Isaac's, would make God smile.